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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: IS KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT

SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

11. Mideast

12. Syrian-Lebanese Track

Key stories in the media:

All media led with last night's defeat of PM Sharon in the Knesset vote on the 2005 state budget, which was rejected 69-43. Eight Knesset members were absent. Only Likud and United Torah Judaism (UTJ) voted in favor of the bill. Immediately afterwards, Sharon fired the five Shinui cabinet ministers. All media reported on the expected negotiations with the Labor Party and other parties (notably Shas and UTJ) toward a national-unity government. Ha'aretz quoted senior Likud members as saying that Sharon will be hard-pressed to expand the government without Shas. At a news conference this afternoon, Sharon hinted that Labor would enter his government, and announced that cabinet minister Tzipi Livni would become acting justice minister.

Ha'aretz and Israel Radio quoted President Bush as saying Wednesday in Halifax, Canada, that the way to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is to promote Palestinian democracy, not by pressuring the parties regarding particular border routes or settlement sites. "This approach has been tried before without success," said Bush, adding, "The Palestinian people deserve a peaceful government that truly serves their interests, and the Israeli people need a true partner in peace."

Israel Radio quoted Secretary of State Colin Powell as saying that the decision announced Wednesday by Marwan Barghouti to run as an independent candidate for PA chairmanship may be "problematic." Leading media cited criticism of Barghouti's move within Fatah.

The media reported that Israel and Egypt agreed Wednesday on the deployment of 750 Egyptian troops along the Gaza-Egypt border. Ha'aretz reported that Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman and FM Ahmed Abu el-Gheit proposed at high-level talks in Jerusalem Wednesday that Israel pull out from the entire "Philadelphi Route" and help bolster the new Palestinian leadership's efforts to maintain calm by refraining from assassination operations, demolishing homes and entering cities in the territories. The media quoted Sharon as saying that a withdrawal from Philadelphi would only be possible if the arms smuggling from Egypt stops. Leading media cited FM Silvan Shalom's response: "Where there is no terror, there will also be quiet, but a hudna [truce] is a time bomb. We favor quiet, but that's not a solution, merely postponing the inevitable." Leading media reported that Egypt and Israel will exchange letters about the redeployment in order to avoid amending the peace treaty, which currently allows Egypt to deploy only civilian police in the region. Ha'aretz quoted Suleiman as saying the deployment could occur in January. Israel Radio quoted Palestinian FM Nabil Shaath as saying that, in talks with PLO Chairman Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), Hamas's leaders have agreed to a mutual truce with Israel, when it resumes its negotiations with the Palestinians.

Jerusalem Post quoted Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz as saying Wednesday that Israel hopes that the new Palestinian leadership to emerge from the January 9 elections will prove to be a true partner and ready to embark on dialogue.

Ha'aretz quoted Israeli officials as saying that the real reason for the cancellation of the visit of Deputy U.S. National Security Advisor Steve Hadley to the region was probably the absence of senior PA officials from the region and the political crisis in Israel. The officials were quoted as saying that the U.S. also feared that an American embrace would hurt the new Palestinian leadership. Ha'aretz reported that Elliott Abrams, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director of the National Security Council for Near East and North African Affairs, will make a private visit to Israel this weekend, where he will also hold diplomatic talks.

Ha'aretz (Akiva Eldar) reported that Palestinian PM Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala) wrote a letter two weeks ago to the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee (AHLC) coordinating donor-nation funding to the territories, in which he expressed concern over the possibility that the AHLC conference to be held next week in Oslo "may have the effect of reinforcing Israel's unilateral acts and further harm prospects for a viable solution to the conflict by focusing on short-term needs in the Gaza Strip without sufficient attention to the West Bank."

Leading media reported that Sharon and Shalom have denied a report published in Maariv Wednesday that Israel ignored Syrian President Bashar Assad's readiness to come to Jerusalem and speak to the Knesset as a first step toward renewing peace talks. The media quoted Egyptian FM Ahmed Abu el-Gheit as saying Wednesday that he did not bring any message from Syria to Israel. Eytan Bentsur, who was Foreign Ministry D-G between 1996 and 2000 and who represented Israel in talks with Syrian officials a year and a half ago, confirmed in various media that Assad had agreed to come to Jerusalem. Maariv quoted senior Israeli defense establishment sources as saying that Israel should not turn a blind eye to Assad.

Leading media reported that FBI officials searched the Washington offices of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) on Wednesday. Israel Radio and Jerusalem Post's and Ha'aretz's web sites reported that the FBI issued subpoenas to four senior AIPAC officials requesting that they appear before a grand jury, possibly in relation with the alleged leaking of materials to Israel by Pentagon official Larry Franklin. The FBI officials also seized computer files from senior AIPAC employees Steve Rosen and Keith Weissman. Yediot quoted GOI sources in Jerusalem as saying that Israel does not spy in the U.S.

Israel Radio reported that Israel Police and the Prisons Service are asking the GOI for 470 million shekels (around USD 107 million) for carrying out the evacuation of settlers in accordance with the disengagement plan.

Ha'aretz reported that the World Bank wants to condition increased international aid to the Palestinians upon a series of measures to be taken by Israel and the PA, according to a report it issued on Wednesday, ahead of the conference of PA donor countries in Norway next week. Israel Radio says that, according to the World Bank report, Israel will allow 35,000 Palestinians to continue working in the country for another four years.

Jerusalem Post notes that the members of the delegation of U.S. Senators who ended their visit to Israel on Wednesday have made upbeat declarations about peace prospects in the Middle East.

Jerusalem Post reported that the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) has defied orders by the Jerusalem Municipality to stop illegal construction inside its Jerusalem compound.

Ha'aretz and Jerusalem Post reported that Wednesday the Knesset plenum narrowly rejected a law that would allow the Israel Lands Administration to build communities for Jews only.

Leading media reported that Tuesday Knesset Member Rabbi Michael Melchior (Labor Party-Meimad) created a new social movement, "Tnufa" (Momentum), which he said might run for the Knesset in the future.

Maariv reported that Saudi Arabia's King Saud University has started offering Hebrew classes, which are currently attended by 20 students. The teachers are Hebrew speaking Jordanians and Egyptians. The newspaper quoted a Saudi source as saying that it is important to learn Hebrew in order to acquire first-hand knowledge about the Jews.

Yediot cited a poll conducted in Germany by Bielefeld University researchers, according to which over 52 percent of Germans believe that Israel's actions in the territories are not different in principle than what the Third Reich did to the Jews. Almost 70 percent of Germans said that Israel is fighting a "war of extermination" against the Palestinians. The results of the survey will be published today in Berlin, at a conference conducted by bodies fighting the far Right in Germany.

11. Mideast:

Summary:

Veteran journalist Yaron London wrote in the lead editorial of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "It seems that there has never been such a wide gap between a majority of Israelis, which is averse to this coalition, and the Knesset members who have brought it about."

Diplomatic correspondent Aluf Benn wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "Israel needs a strategic change in its attitude toward the UN."

Block Quotes:

I. "Toward an Unwelcome Government"

Veteran journalist Yaron London wrote in the lead editorial of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (December 2): "A public opinion poll [published Wednesday in Yediot Aharonot] found that a huge majority [of Israelis] opposes the holding of elections at this time, and that the three largest parties [Likud, Labor and Shinui] together enjoy a sweeping majority among voters. It apparently is no coincidence that the percentage of support for those parties is similar to that of Israelis who support a disengagement from the Gaza Strip. The clear inference of this is that a government formed by the three large parties might relieve Israeli politics from its predicament.... Very unfortunately, the establishment of such a government is not possible, since Sharon can't manage to subdue the branch of his party that opposes an exaggerated veering of the government to the left. In order to assuage that branch's hostility to the Labor Party, Sharon has sacrificed Shinui, and bought the support of United Torah Judaism; in order to stabilize his government, he intends to invite Shas, an opponent of disengagement.... It seems that there has never been such a wide gap between a majority of Israelis, which is averse to this coalition, and the Knesset members who have brought it about."

II. "Edging Back Toward the UN"

Diplomatic correspondent Aluf Benn wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz (December 2): "Reading the United Nations resolutions on the Middle East is a difficult experience for Israel.... [Yet,] Israel has chalked up a few points at the General Assembly this year. For the first time the resolutions state that they are 'gravely concerned' about 'suicide terror attacks against Israelis,' without mentioning their Palestinian perpetrators, and condemn anti-Semitism. At the Foreign Ministry they are proud of the achievement. But in diplomacy there are no free lunches, and in return for a certain softening of the criticism of Israel's behavior in the territories -- the 'military actions' instead of the 'military attacks,' for example -- the condemnation of the Jewish settlements in the territories has become more severe.... A tactic of dealing with clauses and formulations is not enough. Israel needs a strategic change in its attitude toward the UN. Is it perhaps worth accepting the applicability of the Geneva Conventions to the territories, instead of opposing this and being subjected to repeated condemnations?... A government that has dared to initiate an evacuation of settlements is able also to reexamine its attitude toward the international community. And just as the disengagement plan has improved Israel's international standing, it can also enjoy the fruit of a bolder diplomacy."

12. Syrian-Lebanese Track:

Summary:

Middle East affairs commentator Guy Bechor, a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center, wrote in Yediot Aharonot: "If [Bashar Assad] means a frozen peace devoid of legitimacy and bordering on hostility, as we have with Egypt, perhaps it is preferable for Israel to have the present situation, both stability and territory, remain in place."

Block Quotes:

"Bashar's Photo-Op"

Middle East affairs commentator Guy Bechor, a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center, wrote in Yediot Aharonot (December 2): "The urgency that has now come over Assad stems from the fact that George Bush was re-elected to the U.S. presidency, contrary to the hopes of the Syrian President. Washington may therefore remember Syria's membership in the 'axis of evil' and acting accordingly.... Perhaps Syria thinks that Israel is like Lebanon, with which it made a 'fraternity and friendship agreement' and in practice subjugated it to its authority.... If Israel understands that Bashar Assad is only interested in using it and being saved, without paying anything in return, he should be reminded of his father's favorite rule: there are no free lunches. Syria continues to act as a lawbreaking state, and therefore its regime has no legitimacy.... After four years of Intifada, burning Arab hatred unparalleled in the past, and deception, Israel has matured. It no longer automatically buys into the peace mumblings of Arab dictators, who do so at its expense solely for their own benefit. Irrespective of ... three conditions that should be posed to Bashar [regarding the removal of Palestinian terror groups from Syria, the disarming of Hizbullah, and the removal of the Syrian troops from Lebanon], let the Syrian president be kind enough to make it clear in his own words what he means by 'peace' with Israel. If he means a frozen peace devoid of legitimacy and bordering on hostility, as we have with Egypt, perhaps it is preferable for Israel to have the present situation, both stability and territory, remain in place."

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